40 Bodies Arrive At Dover Air Base

By Alice Bonner
Washington Post Staff Writer

DOVER, Del., Nov. 23—Forty victims of the Guyana mass suicide were flown here today, the first shipment of bodies to be returned to the United States from Jonestown since last Saturday's hours of horror.

An Air Force C141 cargo plane, carrying remains in plastic bags inside aluminum containers stacked three deep on a loading pallet, landed at Dover Air Force Base shortly before 6 a.m. It was the first of a series expected to bring the 408 dead followers of Peoples Temple leader the Rev. Jim Jones the 3,000 miles here from Georgetown, the capital of Guyana.

The big gray-and-white aircraft taxied to a stop near the base operations center. Air Force chaplain Paul Wragg prayed briefly into a microphone. Dozens of reporters and cameras recorded the event behind a rope 50 yards away.

"We ask thy blessing on the crew and those whose work it is to handle these remains . . . give us strength and understanding that all things might be done with dignity and tenderness and care," Wragg said.

The bodies of four children were among the 27 females and 13 males in the first delivery, according to a State Department spokesman. Only one of the 40 had been tentatively identified in Guyana.

Because of the facilities, Dover was chosen for the return of the victims. They took their lives Saturday in a communal swallowing of cyanide-laced drink after members of the Peoples Temple

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shot and killed Rep. Leo S. Ryan and four others who were on a fact-finding mission at the group's jungle settlement and had departed with several defecting members.

"In our judgment this was the best facility. The people here have had the experience in dealing with this kind of situtation, this many casualties," explained Maj. Brigham Shuler, a spokesman for the Pentagon. Most of the Guyana victims were from California. Shuler said that although Oakland Air Force Base has a similar facility, the Dover mortuary is the largest of its kind on the East Coast.

Today's was the beginning of the largest delivery to Dover since March 1977, when 327 of the victims of a collision between two 747 jetliners at the Tenerife airport in the Canary Islands were brought here.

Built in 1969 to handle remains of American military personnel and their family members from Europe, the facility also processed a number of Vietnam war casualties.

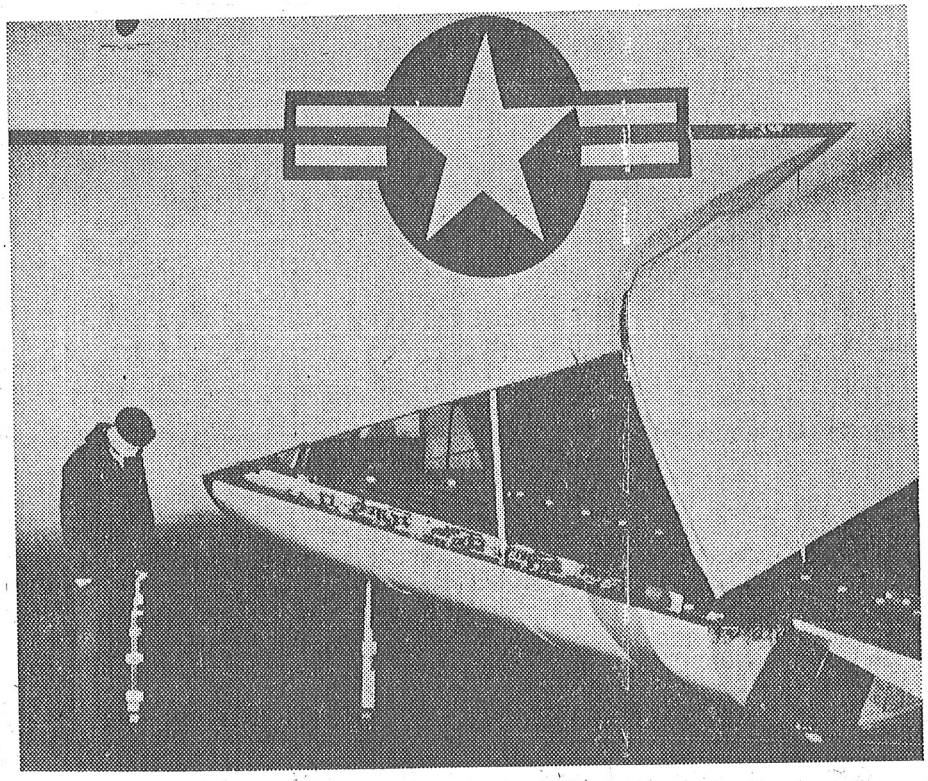
A team of experts in radiology and denistry from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology at Walter Reed Army Medical Center will assist the nine-member base morturary staff in processing and identifying the remains, according to Maj. Robert Groom, information officer at Dover.

The bodies will be cleaned and embalmed, then wrapped in white sheets, plastic bags and a third human-remains container before being released to next of kin for burial, Groom said. Identification of the bodies, badly decomposed after lying for days in the tripical sun, will be based on photographs, physical descriptions, medical and dental charts, and as a last resort, sight recognition by relatives, Shuler said.

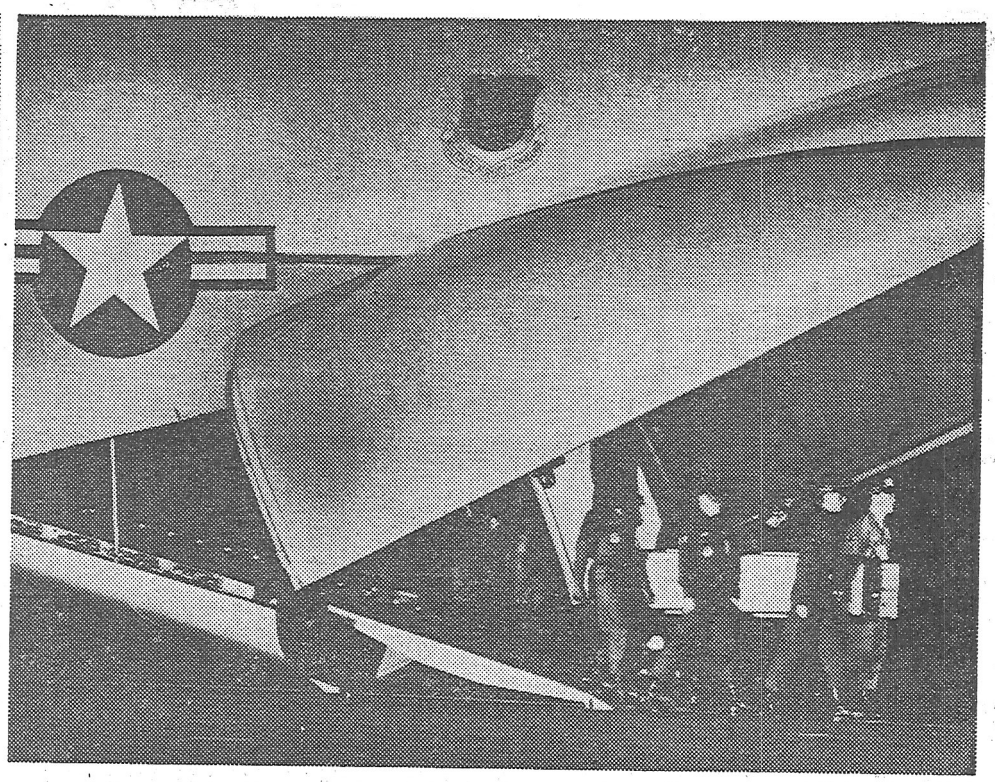
However, the bodies are already "unrecognizable," according to a spokesman for the State Department's Guyana task force. "At this point getting them into bags is the main priority," spokesman Jeff Dietrich said today.

After Wragg's prayer this morning, volunteer Air Force pall bearers in green fatigues carried 13 containers from the plane to five waiting vans. The grim procession, led by an Air Force car, then drove slowly the half-mile to the single-story cement mortuary which was closed to reporters. Twenty-seven other containers, identified on the outside by "shipping numbers," were hauled in two large trailers to save time, Shuler said.

A plan to transport the bodies in five flights, 81 to a plane, went awry when the heat and humidity of Guyana's tropical forest hampered the work of military crews removing them from the Jonestown settlement.



After predawn flight from Guyana to Dover Air Force Base with bodies of 40 victims, brief prayer



By John McDonnell—The Washington Post

is said, left, before C141 is unloaded. Then, crewmen carry off containers for transport to mortuary.

"This is a very strange kind of situation. It's a great human tragedy and yet they (the victims) don't fit into any usual categories," James Potter of the Dover chapter of the American Red Cross said.

The Red Cross and Air Force chaplains and legal representatives today staffed an information center for relatives of the victims, who are not allowed on the base.

The center had received only six telephone inquiries from relatives by late this afternoon, Sgt. Julio Carlo said. The calls came from Los Angeles, Boston, Louisiana and downtown Dover, among other places, Carlo said.